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Truth Is, Leaks Trickle Down More Than Up

When it comes to having it up to your keister with the question of leaks, the average federal employee could give instruction to the president seven days a week and still have plenty of material left over. This administration's top officials regularly shoot themselves and their leader in the foot from ambush, then just as regularly try to handle the ensuing uproar by adopting new restrictions which suggest the problem is to be found in the bowels of the bureaucracy. In the process, they and

denied the person was his source and eventually the matter faded.

In late 1982 and January of this year, the White House staff was busily engaged in open war by leak to influence the president's budget decisions. The last straw was the New York Times quote of a White House official who termed the budget process an "unmitigated disaster." Up came the president's keister and down came a new edict.

Henceforth, under new "Guidelines for Press Coordination," White House communications director David Gergen would clear all press interviews in advance or "designate" a White House official as the person to answer questions on a particular subject. "I would not call it a gag order," Gergen said. "We are going to try and serve you to insure that we get a full and free flow of information."

We all know how well that worked. Indeed, the man known to be one of the more adroit leakers at the White House, Chief of Staff James A. Baker III, was caught just a little earlier calling for Ray Donovan's resignation as secretary of labor in a Texas interview he thought wouldn't be attributed to him. I note that only to observe how skillfully White House staffers, anonymous to the last person, conducted their hidden war against Anne Burford until she was finally forced to resign as administrator of EPA last week. Again, these weren't small fry, nor were their identities all that hard to fathom. The president's repeated insistence that he stood behind Mrs. Burford was made a hollow mockery by men who stand at his side in most pictures.

But Mr. Reagan apparently continues to believe that the source of his troubles with leaks is to be found further down the chain of command. Thus, late last week came the idiocy to top all idiocies. He issued an executive order requiring every federal employee who has a security clearance to sign a nondisclosure pledge and agree to take lie detector tests when required. Failure to comply can result in "adverse consequences" and those who do not cooper-

ate in leak investigations will be subject to mandatory punishment.

There is enough to prompt some civil libertarians to claim it violates the Constitution and promise a court test. But what it reveals about the president's willful blindness about the source of his leak problems is more interesting than the probable legal ramifications of a system which won't work no matter how toughly it is enforced. The rabbits he is hunting aren't out in the dark forests of the federal apparatus, but in the thickets right under foot. If he is serious about his statement in the new order that "safeguarding against unlawful disclosures of properly classified information is a matter of grave concern and high priority for this administration," he should fire at random every third person in his immediate staff. He would be more likely to hit the important leakers that way than by foraging out with lie detectors and FBI agents through Washington's teeming bureaus and departments.

That is said only partly in jest. To repeat the old saw, the federal government is a ship which leaks most profusely at the top. It is also an institution which tries to keep secret far too much information, with estimates running as high as 95% for material which could be made public without harming the national interest. Thus a president who is seriously concerned about protecting truly sensitive material would begin by making an example of those nearest to him who violate that concern, then pruning out that vast array of paper which doesn't deserve classification in order to concentrate more fully on the little which does.

But it is simply not serious to use a shotgun to go after a target which requires a rifle and to do so while expanding, rather than contracting, the classification umbrella. What the president is doing is a big, though bad, joke, and it's mostly on him.

Mr. Carter is chief correspondent for "Inside Story," produced for PBS.

Viewpoint

by Hodding Carter III

the president assault common sense and the Constitution as well.

To belabor the record a little, it didn't seem possible that the White House could top the asininity of its proposed guidelines of January 1982, under which National Security Adviser William P. Clark recommended stringent restrictions on the way government employees should deal with the "national media" when the topic was foreign affairs and national security. The press loudly protested, cooler heads prevailed and the more objectionable portions of the proposed order were dropped.

But the fury about leaks which lay behind the abortive crackdown surfaced during the same period, when the Washington Post ran details of a secret session of the Defense Resources Board. At the meeting, military leaders were told that the administration's proposed five-year, \$1.5 trillion defense program could cost up to 50% more than expected.

When that story broke, the hunt was on, with Defense Department officials using lie detectors right and left. For a while, it appeared they might actually have found their man, the director of manpower management in the office of the assistant secretary of defense for manpower. He denied it, the reporter who wrote the story stoutly